DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 164 704 UD 018 996

AUTHOR Johnson, Mark
TITLE Legitimatizing Violence: Audience Judgments of Television Situations.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Aggression; *Behavior Change; *Behavior Problems; Cognitive Processes; Environmental Influences; Individual Characteristics; *Television; Television Viewing; *Violence

ABSTRACT

This document examines some of the factors involved in individual judgments of television portrayed violent behaviors in an attempt to determine how and why people attach aggressive labels to behaviors and to assess the impact of such decisions. A review of related literature is provided to point out the lack of substantial attention in such research to this area. This report then describes a study of forty adolescents undertaken to test two hypotheses: (1) there is a positive relationship between indices of viewers' aggressive behavior and aggressive character and program preferences, and (2) there is a positive relationship between indices of viewers' aggressive behavior and the frequency with which individuals will approve of televised aggression. Data from the study indicate that the first hypothesis was not supported whereas the second hypothesis was strongly supported. Total aggression score, group membership, sex, and approval of specific situations where television characters used violence were used as the predicting variables. Based upon these findings, it is argued that a new definition of television impact is required and that it must be the basis for understanding the complex interactional and cognitive processes stimulated by television viewing and, in particular, televised violence. (Author/EB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

DEC 21 1978

ED164704

LEGITIMATIZING VIOLENCE: AUDIENCE JUDGMENTS OF TELEVISION SITUATIONS

MARK JOHNSON, Ph.D.
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mark Johnson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

UD018996

Mark Johnson graduated from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with an M.A. in Mass Communication and a Ph.D in Communication Studies with emphasis on media research and the social impact of mass communication. He also received his B.A. from the University in social science and history. Current position is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications at the University of Houston, previous experience includes teaching students with special needs and Director of the Social Adjustment Program in the Springfield, Massachusetts Public School System.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine some of the factors involved in individual judgments of television portrayed violent behaviors. Numerous researchers have established a case for an on-going evaluative process taking place. Decisions are being made on television portrayals in regards to their overall utility and their adoption for personal use in solving problems.

In general this study indicates that a complex evaluative process is at work and that adolescents are closely judging the personalities and behaviors of television characters. This process cannot be explained through demographics or personality variables alone or in comgination. The full range of viewer, content and situational variables must be taken into account to adequately explain the impact of television violence on viewer aggression; certainly, however, the normative influence of violent television characters contributes to the aggressive behavior of adolescents.

A new definition of impact must be the basis for an understanding of the complex interactional and cognitive processes that are being stimulated by the viewing of television and in particular, televised violence. The concept of impact based on the numbers of hours and programs viewed, related to the demographics of the audience, although attractive to various people for various reasons, provides answers that are insufficient. The impact of the medium of television is far more complicated than was once thought if we accept the fact that identical stimuli can produce diverse interpretations and provoke different judgments, some of which are evidenced in this study.

The more prevelant thrusts in the field of mass communications research seem to be aimed in the following directions: examining the message source variables, the components and nature of the message and the nature of the message as it relates to the environment of the receiver. Such perspectives are often combined with research in the field of psychology and sociology relating to behavior modification, persuasion theory and societal pressures to assess the influence of television in general and televised violence in particular.

However, The Surgeon General's Report on TV violence states that after numerous third variables have been tested and accounted for including exposure to violent television programs, the effects of violence viewing still remain.[1] Bandura comments on the directions being taken in television research in the following way:

> The behavioral component has been studied in considerable detail, the judgmental component on the other hand has received little attention; so that the factors that lead people to attach aggressive labels to social behavior are less well understood.[2]

Research has been done which was aimed at the "labeling" or judgmental actions of viewers. Previous research such as that done by Bandura and Walters[3] indicates that adolescents are making judgments on behaviors performed by television characters; these researchers and others have identified various situations and conditions in which viewers who are exposed to portrayals of violence are rendering judgments of the actions, their relationship to real life and their desirability for adoption as legitimate behavioral models. Research done by Meyer[4] and other work by Bandura has dealt with the justified and unjustified component of violence viewing. But in these cases what was justified and unjustified was a determination of the researcher not of the viewers.

Despite the attention being given to viewers' social judgments of television content, the individual components of the decision making process as they

relate to those value judgments are relatively uninvestigated. This is especially true for adolescents who were used in this study. Although considerable importance is attached to the adolescent age group, this stage in personality development is not at all well researched. Perhaps as Bandura suggests:

> identification of social learning determinants of aggression under natural conditions of life requires painstaking analysis of the interactional process and therefore tends to be ignored.[5]

The research indicates that audiences are making judgments on violent programs in regards to justifications perceived reality behavioral modeling. Knowing that some people are being influenced by violent programs and that researchers have eliminated a substantial, direct viewer-impact relationship, the next logical step would seem to be the isolation of those personality traits that mediate and determine judgments of televised violence. This study, which is exploratory in nature, looks at some of the components of the individual, aside from traditional demographics, in an attempt to unravel the end of the message chain: the activities of adolescent viewers in their role as gatekeeper and evaluator of depicted behaviors. The purpose of this investigation was to determine how and why people attach aggressive labels to behaviors and to assess the impact of such decisions.

Based on the literature and the previously identified gaps in the research, the following hypotheses were tested:

1. There is a positive relationship between indices of viewers aggressive behavior and aggressive character and program preferences.

2. There is a positive relationship between indices of viewers aggressive behavior and the frequency with which individuals will approve of televised aggression.

METHODOLOGY

The 28 aggression items from the "Edwards Personal Preference Schedule"[6] were administered to all adolescents participating in the study. The responses were evenly divided between internal and external indicators of aggressive feelings and overt behavior. Internal aggressive responses were those where the repondent chose an answer which commenced with "I feel...". External responses began "I like to...." and indicated overt behavior.

The author developed a test the "What Do You Think?" Test of Normative Social Judgments. The test was validated on groups demographically similar to the participants in the study. Students drawn from the same school but not participating in the project were asked to name their favorite television characters and then rate them as "violent", "partially violent" or "non-violent". Using this information as a starting point, the programs featuring the most popular characters were viewed and actual situation were noted and prepared into a test form. The test had a total of 20 items and was subdivided into categories including: violence employed by a law enforcement official, violence directed against a female by a male, the threat of violence and violence used by a character other than a law enforcement official and miscellaneous. The participants were asked to study the situations and indicate "approval", "approval with reservations" or "disapproval".

The total number of participants was 40. They were divided into two groups, the adjustment and the control group. The adjustment group was composed of 20 students designated by their school to participate in a program for chronic social adjustment problems. The control group consisted of a homogeneous, middle ninth grade division at an inner city junior high school. Members were administered all the testing instruments separately; they were given in a face to face interview, a self-report test of programs and character

preference and hypothetical behavior situations. The students were asked to name their favorite television shows and their favorite character from each of the programs.

Responses to all situations were tabulated and cross tabulated; simple and multiple correlations analysis were used to determine the most important variables predicting approval of various kinds of televised aggressive behaviors.

RESULTS

The following variables were used in step-wise multiple regression analyses: group membershp; total aggression; age; overt aggression; approval of male versus female violence situations; internal aggression scores; approval of a law enforcement official taking a life in the line of duty; disaporoval of aggression as depicted in a given situation, past aggressive history and sex. There were no correlations established between the selection of television characters and programs and any of the variables listed above. Thus, two groups were homogeneous in their favorite program and character selections.

The results of multiple regression indicated that membership in the adjustment group, high scores on the overt and internal aggression indices' and approval of male versus female violence acccunted for 55% of the variance in predicting the overall, unconditional approval of violence as portrayed on television. Other predictors entered, including sex and age did not contribute significantly to explaining approval levels. In predicting the <u>disapproval</u> of violence, low scores on the Edward's indices and the respondent's attitude toward a law enforcement official taking a life accounted for 56% of the total variance. Again, sex did not contribute significantly.

The multiple correlation for predicting the total aggression score showed that group membership, with the adjustment group members scoring higher, dis-

MULTIPLE CORRELATION COEFFICENTS FOR SELECTED DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES*

	R.	F.	SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL	R^2
Overall approval of aggressive situations 1+3+6+4+7	.74	8.44	.001	.55
Disapproval of violent situations 4+5+6+7	.75	11.55	< .001	.56
Total Aggression Score 1+5+9	.67	9.82	< .001	.45
Group Membership 2+7+9	.73	13.69	< .001	.53
Criticize for being Non-Violent 2+4	.45	4.70	< .015	.20
Approval of Male v. Female Violence 4+7	.50	6.29	< .004	.25
Approval of Police Violence 3+9+10	.48	5.48	< .008	.23

*Independent Variable Legend: (1) Group Membership, (2) Past Aggressive History, (3) Approval of Male Versus Female Violence, (4) Approval of a Law Enforcement Official Taking a Life, (5) Total Aggression Score, (6) Overt Aggression Score, (7) Internal Aggression Score, (8) Disapproval of Aggression as used in the Program. (9) Sex, (10) Age.

approval of aggression, and sex (being female) predicted the level of aggressiveness on the Edward's Scale. In predicting the likelihood for being chosed for inclusion in a program for social adjustment problems, a high internal aggression scope, sex (male), a more violent past aggressive history, were the best predictors of a adjustment group membership, accounts for 53% of the variance ($p < .001$)

Those participants with a more violent past aggressive history and a high rate of approval of policemen taking a life were the most likely to criticize a character for not being violent enough. Subjects with a high internal aggression score and who approve of situations where a law enforcement official took a life were also the most likely to approve of male versus female violence. Sex did not provide predictability in this instance. Finally, males who approved of another male aggressing against a female are the most likely to approve of a law enforcement official taking a life in the line of duty.

Past aggressive history, aggression scores, the approval of male versus female violence, and law enforcement officials taking a life are were predictive of aggressive behavior and the approval of violence in the media. Generally, the use of violence on television is judged as successful and appropriate. Character and program preferences were not related to the approval of violence. Adolescents were more likely to criticize a character for being too easy rather than too violent and the use of violence by traditional authority figures, male heads of household, and police is approved of, suggestions that certain stereotypes are being recognized as having additional legal or extra legal rights.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis tested was that there was a positive relationship between the various indices of aggressive behavior and aggressive program and character preference. Although past aggressive history was strongly related to the chances of being designated for membership in the social adjustment group, past aggressive history did not relate to character preference. The results support Chaney[7] who challenges Schramm's concept that more aggressive people are attuning to violent programs. The latter theory finds no support in this data. Hypothesis one was not supported.[8]

The second hypothesis tested was that there is a relationship between aggressive behavior and the degree to which an individual will approve of televised violence. The data clearly and strongly supports this hypothesis. Using overall, unconditional approval as a criterion, the following variables provided substantial predictability: total aggression score, group membership, sex, and approval of specific situations where television characters used violence. Past aggressive history is related to approval in that it is the strongest predictor of group membership; and the adjustment group members with more violent past histories were the most likely to approve of TV violence across the gamut of circumstances in which TV characters use violence. In specific situations involving males aggressing against females group membership is very strongly related to approval. Curiously, sex did not correlate in these instances. Apparently being male or female is unrelated to one's tendency to approve of such acts of aggression. In predicting the approval of a policeman taking a life in the line of duty, group membership, sex, age and past aggressive history correlate significantly. A more violent past aggressive history will also correlate strongly with criticizing a character for not being violent enough.

In multiple regression results, group membership, total aggression, internal and overt aggression accounted for 55% of the variance in predicting the approval of TV violence. It is somewhat difficult to explain why males are allowed to aggress against females and why law enforcement officials are allowed to take a life in the line of duty. Although approval of such actions was higher in the adjustment group than in the control group, unconditional approval was strong in all instances. Several studies suggest possible explanations. Himmelweit, Oppenheim, and Vince felt that stylized crime show violence did not arouse the viewer,[9] Cline et. al., reported that television may desentsitize viewers to violence,[10] and Bailyn found that an adult lead who is one of the "good guys" is a highly approved of character type.[11] A collection of events involving all or some of these stimuli could provide the optimum situation for approval of a variety of violent television actions. Group membership and aggressive indices are not entirely satisfactory as explanations for this phenomena. True, the less aggressive control group members had lower rates of unconditional approval of television violence; but the answer category which benefited from this difference was approval with "reservations". Specifically, people chosing that answer were approving of the use of violence by character but rejecting it for personal use. This is not really a great improvement on unconditional approval, for once an act is committed it cannot be undone. All the respondent is saying is that it is not a personal or idosyncratic preference.

In providing strong support for hypothesis two, the data both support some of the work which Chaffee did for the Surgeon General's Report,but also may have reduced it to a somewhat superficial level. The question must be asked: "What is impact?" Many researchers, both those like Chaffee who would reduce the effect placed on violence mediated by television and those who would purge television of all aggression, have too long equated "viewing"

with "impact". Is viewing impact? In a trivial sense, yes. One effect that a program has on its audience is that it obtained them as an audience and therefore had the "impact" of keeping them from watching some other program or engaging in some other form of activity. But it is obvious that such a definition of impact as the equal of viewing is a poor basis for making sociological or psychological evaluations and recommendations for the altering of television or any other form of media.

It is not difficult to ask and readily answer who is watching what, for how long, when and what are that person's composite demographics. The impact of television cannot be satisfactorily determined by totalling the number of hours that certain programs are being watched, coded with names and correlated with some aggression index that researchers cannot even agree on. It can however, be the selection of characters, evaluation of their behavior, evaluation of television problem solving and the making of subsequent decisions. This explanation can account for a person with a severe past aggressive history criticizing a character for not being violent enough. The implication of an approval with reservations is considerable. For in allowing some people to use violence, while rejecting it as a personal choice, certain additional rights are being designated as belonging to adult authority figures. Television is reinforcing certain role stereotypes and giving these characters an almost free rein to solve problems through the use of violence. This area has for too long been neglected by social scientists. Such material must be reconciled with the Surgeon General's findings that there is no direct relationship between violence viewing and adolescent aggression. The choices are to reject the report to the Surgeon General, reject the traditional research that contradicts the Report, or accept the report as closing only one avenue, the direct incititing to violence, and look for more subtle, more complex ways in which television is having an impact on adolescents. Approving of actions,

either for yourself or for others, is of far greater importance than merely watching those actions.

A new definition of impact must provide the basis for an understanding of the complex interactional processes that are now being stimulated by the viewing of television and, in particular, televised violence. The old answers, while attractive to many people for many reasons, are insufficent. The impact of the medium of television is far greater and more complicated than was once thought, given the fact that identical stimuli (programs) can produce diverse interpretations and provoke different judgments as is evidenced in this study. Most importantly, how adolescents judge the violence they view semmingly plays an important role in determining how the violence will affect viewers' perceptions and subsequent behavior. The probability of adolescents using TV violence to reinforce their already existing predispositions to believe violently is substantially increased for those adolescents who have come to accept violence as an appropriate means of conflict resolution. Not only do these adolescents think that most of the violent behaviors displayed by TV characters work effectively, they also see it as being the right way to behave--the transfer from the TV screen to their own environment occurs, and their behavior is affected.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this research is of a preliminary nature it is at least clear that a complex evaluative process is triggered in many television viewing situations. Personal aggressiveness and past aggressive history are reliable predictors of attitudes towards the use of violence as a problem solver. It also appears that television is encouraging the idea that certain stereotype figures are endowed with additional perogatives when it comes to the use of aggression. This is of particular importance for adolescents who are going through an important formative stage in personality development and are evolving concepts of role expectations.

NOTES

1. S. Chaffee and J. McLeod, " Adolescent Television use in the family context." In G. Comstock, et. al (Eds.) Television and Social Behavior, Volume III: Television and Adolescent Aggressiveness . Washington,D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972, 149-172.

2 A. Bandura, Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1973. p. 6.

3 A. Bandura and Walters, R.H. "Aggression." In H. Stevens (ed.) Child Psychology, Part I.

4 T.P. Meyer, "Effects of viewing justified and unjustified real film violence on aggressive models." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 1972, 23, 21-29.

5 A. Bandura, ibid. p. 9.

6 A.L. "Edwards' Personal Preference Schedule, University of Washington, 1953."

7 D.C. Chaney, "Involvement, realism and perception of aggression in television programs." Human Relations, 1970, 23, 373-382.

8 W. Schramm, J. Lyle and J. Parker Television in the Lives of Our Children London, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 161-163.

9 H.T. Himmelweit and A.N. Oppenheim, and P.T. Vince, Television and the Child. London, Oxford University Press, 1958.

10 V.B. Cline, R.C. Croft and S. Courrier, "Desensitization of Children to television violence." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, 27, 360-365.

11 L. Bailyn, "Mass Media and Children: A study of exposure habits and cognitive effects." Psychological Monographs, 1959, 73.